The Age of the Image: Redefining Literacy in a World of Screens

Apkon, Stephen
Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2013

Book Review

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Teachers routinely complain that students do not read well or enough. What they mean by this is that students do not know how to analyze written texts, in part because they fail to engage regularly with written texts. Stephen Apkon's book challenges this traditional focus on verbal literacy to advocate strongly for visual literacy, particularly in K-12 education. In a world saturated with screens and images to be decoded, Apkon, the founder and executive director of the Jacob Burns Film Center, argues that we ignore visual literacy at our peril.

Few would argue with Apkon that we live in "the age of the image," and in response to our situation Apkon argues for the importance of understanding the grammar of the visual. He does so by examining several interrelated perspectives on images and visual storytelling, such as brain science, advertising, and film techniques. He also provides a history of visual literacy that parallels in many ways the development of visual literacy. Rather than buy into the common parental and academic moral panic over "screen time" used by digital native "screenagers," he encourages his readers to embrace screens and images by learning intimately how they work. This will benefit both producers and watchers, he argues, and can help classrooms function more seamlessly in our screen-obsessed culture.

This book will be useful to teachers who want food for thought but not direct guidance. Apkon notes early on that "As new literacies emerge, they don't negate more traditional forms of literacy, but rather embrace them wholly" (10) but then goes on to champion what sound like fairly vapid if contextually apt viral videos as examples of visual literacy achieved. Apkon's bias is understandable, but it seems to leave other literacies in the dust, despite the author's claims that he's not doing just that. The chapter devoted to teaching is full of information, including a

sketch of the history of technologies in education, but it does not detail how one might go about this in a classroom or curriculum. In Apkon's favor, he calls for a high school graduation requirement of a five-minute film that illustrates key visual grammatical skills and incorporates written work as well. That kind of balance seems appropriate and necessary.

This review will be published in the traditional written format (although if I were to follow Apkon's prescription I should probably submit a well-edited video). I am wary of Apkon's overwhelming enthusiasm for visual storytelling, placed in his analysis as top of the hierarchy of types of communication. Phrases such as "the unstoppable rise of visual expression as a popular means of conveying truth" seems remarkably optimistic: images, like words, can be used for powerfully negative propaganda as much as they can for "truth." In sum, this book would have been more useful had it presented a more balanced view of the many literacies and illiteracies made possible by today's technologies.

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